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Negative Evidence: The Critical-Clinical Diagnosis of Fatigue in Copjec's Kiarostami

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ABSTRACT This literary essay examines and rehearses the conceptual challenge fatigue poses to diagnosis in its clinical and critical registers. Taking as its case study Joan Copjec's essay "Battle Fatigue: Kiarostami and Capitalism"—wherein fatigue, conceptually declined from Levinas' weariness of existence and the psychoanalytic death drive, is deployed as a theoretical lens through which to read Abbas Kiarostami's film *Taste of Cherry*—this essay argues that Copjec's diagnosis of Badii's unexplainable suicidality qua fatigue mirrors the clinic's insofar as both render fatigue into a diagnosis of exclusion predicated on forensic registers of negative evidence. For Copjec, fatigue is a symptom of Badii's unexplainable suicidality, not its cause—a logic that effectively reproduces the clinic's diagnosis of myalgic encephalomyelitis / chronic fatigue syndrome (ME/CFS) as the consequence of a suffering without proof. This results in Badii's erasure as a clinical subject of weariness at the behest of a socio-historico-political metaconcept of fatigue. Acknowledging that this trade-off constitutes the dialectical challenge of theorizing any illness, this essay nevertheless argues that fatigue presents a unique theoretical dilemma, insofar as historically and into the present, warring ideological factions have harmoniously eschewed patho-clinical frameworks for a conceptualization of fatigue as the essential condition of life under capitalist modernity. When fatigue is a symptom of everything—of mere living—it becomes a symptom of nothing: it loses its clinical and critical valence. Copjec's diagnosis, then, is not so much deficient as it is demonstrative: like Kiarostami's film(s), it begins with a lack of evidence only to end at an aporetic standstill: the impossibility of shoring up the evidence of lack. Like the slash that separates "ME" from "CFS," this essay argues that fatigue is not what slips through the crack between pre-existing categories of psyche and soma, but the very cut out of which these categories emerge, and upon whose negativity their fraught relation relies.

KEYWORDS Abbas Kiarostami, Joan Copjec, critical clinical, fatigue

Taste of Cherry, Abbas Kiarostami's 1997 Palme d'Or winning film, begets diagnosis. For at its heart is the question of a man's—its protagonist, Mr. Badii's—desire to die; a question which cannot go unanswered. Across sinuous roads etched into a derelict peri-urban landscape, the film depicts Badii as he drives in search of someone to throw "twenty shovels-full of dirt" on the hole in the ground where, come nightfall, he has decided to commit suicide. To his interlocutors, he provides neither motive nor explanation: just cash. The viewer is likewise kept in the dark. If the eponymous taste of cherries, a Turkish taxidermist informs us, drives life's prolongation, Kiarostami offers no clues as to what might cause this aroma to fade, its pleasures to dwindle. In *Taste of Cherry* the death drive is unaccounted for, so its omens are hallucinated everywhere.

The film thus warps its viewer's desire into that of the psychiatrist or the forensic expert.[1] (The difference between these positions is, in this case, purely fantasmatic. Like the rest of Kiarostami's oeuvre, *Taste of Cherry's* ending, along with Badii's fate, remain unresolved). It demands to be read as a suicide letter. Whether this suicide is successful or not matters little; either way the gaze is the same. The eye searches for evidence, while the ear listens for clues. Here the enigma is not so much the man's desire to die as the inexplicability underlying it. In a world ravaged by racial capital, death can be more charitable than the precarious latchings of life. But Badii, unlike the lumpen Iranian ethnic underclass that landscapes his drive, has been favored by God. He is an urban, educated, middle-class man living in Iran at the turn of the century. He is healthy. He drives a Land Rover.

What, then, is his *problem*? In her essay "Battle Fatigue: Kiarostami and Capitalism," Joan Copjec undertakes the question of Badii's suicidality with predictable acuity.[2] She proffers a humble diagnosis, suggesting we read Kiarostami's film through the Levinasian concept of fatigue:

> There exists a weariness which is a weariness of everything and everyone, and above all a weariness of oneself. What wearies then is not a particular form of our life . . . the weariness concerns existence itself [. . .] in weariness existence is something like the reminder of a commitment to exist [. . . and] the impossible refusal of this ultimate obligation. In weariness we want to escape existence itself, and not only one of its landscapes.[3]

Conceived during Levinas' time as a hostage in a Nazi labor camp, *Existence and Existents*—from which arise this passage and Levinas' theory of fatigue writ large—describes a relationship towards Being marred by weariness.[4] For the philosopher, it is existence as a whole, not merely one of its landscapes, that wearies—and weariness is the fundamental condition of a subject's coming into existence. This is an anti-capitalist and anti-ableist notion of fatigue, whereby fatigue is theorized beyond its usual horizon as the body's physiological or psychological depletion, and afforded the weight of presence, the authority of precedence.[5] Wielded in the face of capitalism's "every labor mystique,"[6] fatigue no longer constitutes an escape or pause from existence, but a return to it—albeit with a slight lag; an interval, gap, or short circuit that demagnetizes the present from the future and, for Copjec, turns it towards a past that never was.

Informed by psychoanalytic concepts of drive and repetition, Copjec's reading of fatigue suffuses Levinas' with the temporality of loss and mourning. Fatigue is equivocated with "helplessness" at the hands of a phantom grief borne by an "always already lost past . . . recast as a once actual past of which a people have been robbed or which they themselves squandered."[7] For these reasons and more, Copjec argues, *Taste of Cherry* is "legible through the concept of fatigue . . . [which] helps highlight the odd arduousness of the film's trajectory and permits us to examine both the contemporary issues at the film's centre—issues of war, capitalism and their inhospitable relation to fatigue—*and* the philosophical background informing Kiarostami's image-making practice."[8]

Yet the question nevertheless remains: why is Badii suicidal? For despite Copjec's thorough refraction of *Taste of Cherry* through the prism of fatigue, the expected, perhaps obvious conclusion—that Badii is suicidal *because he is tired*—never materializes. Instead, fatigue emerges throughout the essay as a metaconcept, distilled from the relation between the film's protagonist ("a cipher [through which] the film transforms the way we read the site of traumatic inscription"), the historical conjuncture to which he belongs, and the philosophy of Kiarostami's image-making practice.[9] In addition to its mimetic Kiarostamism, Copjec's instinct—to traffic psychological depth for psychic interiority, permeate the psyche to its socio-historical outside, and avoid the pitfalls of physiologically overdetermined concepts—is, of course, correct.[10] But it fails to produce a dialectic of fatigue, whereby fatigue encodes not only the ontological tiredness of Being or the historical one of laboring beings, but the bodily, debilitating experience of illness. That is to say, fatigue is deprived of *pathos*—afforded little to no footing in the body of the man whose drive has carefully staged the scene of its diagnosis. It is severed from the clinic.

To be sure, this dilemma is not Copjec's alone. In the process of poising the fraught dialectic between the individual dimension of illness and the sociohistorical environment that nurtures and hosts it, one is bound to teeter, however faintly, to one side or another of its balance.[11] While historically, leftist critique has emphasized social etiologies of illness while its reactionary counterpart champions the organic and individualistic realms, fatigue represents a rare bipartisan issue. Industrial capitalists and their neoliberal successors are here in agreement with Marxists: fatigue is a symptom of capitalist modernity.[12] Whether its preordained side-effect or the bodily obstacle to its full-fledged realization,[13] fatigue has and continues to be construed by both sides of the critical divide as both the metaphor and psychosomatic condition of capitalist modernity par excellence.[14] Everyone concurs: life under capitalism is objectively tiring, hence fatigue is simply the physiological and psychic condition of capitalist

life.[15] Echoes of Levinas resound as fatigue and existence grow ever more enmeshed to the point of tautological entwinement.

Amidst such circular logic, what is the province of the clinic—if any—in the apprehension of the weary subject? What gets lost when fatigue is flattened to an amorphous ambient texture suffered by all alike: burned out white collar executives and un(der)paid organizers; bedbound long-haulers and antimaskers suffering from so-called "pandemic fatigue"?[16] When fatigue is a symptom of everything, of mere living, it becomes a symptom of nothing: it loses its clinical *and* critical valence. Paying this price most dearly are people with chronic fatigue, weariest of all. Like the elusive starlet Akiko in Kiarostami's *Like Someone in Love,* who does not go a day without being told she "looks like someone," which is to say no one, the subject of chronic fatigue is, in the clinic and beyond, equated into oblivion.[17] *Of course you're tired,* condescends the doctor to his patient, *everyone's tired!* Suffering is equalized to the point of disappearance by the very figures bestowed with the precious task of its discernment. Instead of galvanizing the individual's fatigue, that of the masses preempts it. Against the backdrop of universal fatigue, the weary subject cannot but fail to emerge—let alone as a subject of illness.[18]

In light of these preoccupations, this essay concentrates on a certain elision of the subject of weariness in Copjec's analysis of fatigue in *Taste of Cherry*. In so doing, it hopes to raise important issues concerning the clinical dimension of fatigue, and its relation to evidentiary registers of diagnosis. By drawing out the resonances between Copjec's psychoanalytic-cum-ontological diagnosis of fatigue and that of the (always already medico-legal) clinic, where chronic fatigue is a diagnosis of exclusion bound to negative evidence, the arguments in this essay trace a clinical counterpoint to the critical debates surrounding fatigue's ubiquity as symptom—of capitalism, modernity, life. As such, they strive beyond disciplinary conventions of staging the aporia between the critical and clinical in order to bridge, however imperfectly, the abyss separating these two registers.[19]

As in its sociohistorical diagnoses, the symptomatic essence of fatigue is axiomatic to medicine's smooth operation—and clinical thinking unspools when fatigue demands to be recognized as a cause of suffering, not merely its symptom. This reflection, then, is not a critique of Copjec's essay; it does not engage with the extensive breadth nor depth of her incisive argument. Rather, it biopsies a specific sliver of her analysis in order to examine the similar ways that clinical and critical diagnoses grapple with fatigue—and ultimately, betray it.

[*Day breaks, drive begins*]

*

Fatigue, for Copjec, is the symptom of Badii's *unexplainable* suicidality, not its cause.[20] Her diagnostic logic can be summarized as follows:

Badii, a man who lacks nothing—"there is no hint of anything lacking in his life"—is nevertheless suicidal.[21] Given the absence of any (particular) reason (organic or psychosocial) for his suffering, what afflicts Badii must be existence itself. That is to say, because he suffers from nothing (specific), Badii must be suffering from everything. Existence, and not one of its pathological landscapes, is diagnosed as the aetiology of Badii's suicidal symptom; a relation which, following Levinas, is secondarily interpreted *as* fatigue. Moreover, it is precisely this ontological nature of Levinasian fatigue that for Copjec brushes so seductively against the psychoanalytic concept of the drive. In her theorization of the death drive qua ontological fatigue, Alenka Zupančič deems this "fatigue as life's fundamental and objective affect."[22] If, as Freud posits in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the death drive is life's primary force; if the aim of all life is death, and life is but a series of detours—circuitous prolongations of the path—to death, then "the death drive is not so much a drive as an *ontological fatigue* . . . a fundamental *affect* of life."[23] Badii is thus a cipher in the dual sense of the word: not only does he encrypt an

impersonal, “objective” fatigue (of a post-revolutionary Iran ravaged by war, capitalism, and a new authoritarian regime), he is a subject who lacks nothing specific, thus becoming, for Copjec, the subject of lack itself. The subject of the drive.

So Badii is tired because he is tired of living, not the other way around. Moreover, he is tired of living because he has nothing (else) to be tired of. Fatigue operates here as a spectral presence that can only be inferred; a pathology that can only be gleaned from the suffering of a man who does not present the requisite signs of wounding across his body or mind. *It is the consequence of a suffering without proof* (“no hint of anything lacking”). In an uncanny reversal, Copjec’s psychoanalytic and ontological diagnosis ends up mirroring its vulgar clinical counterpart, as both render fatigue into a diagnosis of exclusion. In medicine, a diagnosis of exclusion refers to one that does not result from any positive evidence, but from the elimination of all other possible diagnoses. It is a diagnosis based on what is deemed, in forensic terminology, *negative evidence*: “an oxymoronic term that legal professionals and scholars employ when the very absence of material evidence is used as evidence in its own right.”[24] The residual diagnosis when all bloodwork, imagery, and biopsies have returned normal. The clinical garb of one who suffers from—and thus of—*nothing*.

Myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome (ME/CFS) is one such diagnosis, bestowed upon the patient whose “primary symptom” is “severe, disabling” fatigue which has lasted “for at least six months,” is “present more than 50 percent of the time,” and *cannot* be explained by “an established medical condition” or a current diagnosis of “schizophrenia, manic-depressive illness, substance abuse, eating disorder, or proven organic brain disease.”[25] That ME/CFS is a diagnosis of exclusion has everything to do with the fraught understanding of fatigue that pervades our clinical and theoretical imaginaries. Its aporia highlights the short-circuiting of clinical logic when fatigue, a symptom of practically all bodily disease processes and thus the *symptom par excellence*,[26]

appears “on its own,” untethered from aetiological anchoring. To be clear, this is irreducible to the oft-deployed banal framework of medically unexplained symptom (MUS), which rhetorically paints over fatigue’s constitutional threat to clinical logic with the faux humility of a medical science self-aware of its own epistemic limits. For fatigue’s consistent resistance to biomedicalization seems to suggest that it is not the horizon of a medicine yet to come, but what gives the lie to Western medicine’s metaphysics altogether.

Writing about the case of functional pain within the colonial clinic—that is, pain without an identifiable organic etiology—Frantz Fanon remarked that “what [the North African] patient is unaware of is that there is *an exacting medical philosophy*, and that he has flouted this philosophy.”[27] The philosophy in question, which remains as true today as it did at the time of Fanon’s writing in 1952: “Medical thinking proceeds from the symptom to the lesion.”[28] If Fanon could rightly make this claim about pain, then its implications for fatigue are that much more severe. For as we have said, fatigue is not only a symptom, but an ursymptom whose very essence is its belatedness, which is to say, its nature as evidence (of some underlying process, physiological or pathological).[29] When fatigue appears on the clinical stage, one searches for its cause, its lesion. When this cause is absent—when fatigue *is* the lesion—clinical thinking unravels. In the words of Roland Barthes, “What is the place of a lesion of the (total) body in the (socially) recognized table of illnesses? Is weariness an illness or not? Is it a nosological reality?”[30]

It is important to note that this tension Fanon evokes between the symptom and its lesion is but a restaging of that much older Cartesian drama between the body and the mind, upon which all science hinges. The irony then, with a diagnostic entity such as ME/CFS, is that it encapsulates the entire Cartesian legacy within its signifier: ME is an anato-pathophysiological denomination for brain inflammation connoting organic disease; CFS is a tautological string of signifiers connoting subjective illness; and the slash that separates them is none other than

the cut, the negativity against and around which the organic body and the psychological mind take shape. This, I want to posit, is the proper site of fatigue: neither the organic body (ME) nor the psychological mind (CFS) but *the negative cut, symbolized by the slash* (/), around whose absence body and mind congeal as distinct conceptual entities.

To belabor this point, fatigue is not what slips through the crack between pre-existing categories of psyche and soma—hypostatized clinically as organic disorders and mental illnesses—but the very cut out of which these categories emerge, and upon whose negativity their fraught relation relies. Hence Copjec and Zupančič's invaluable insight to theorize fatigue via the drive, the psychoanalytic concept that most gainfully avails this negative space to thought. In this they are not alone: Kiarostami, too, is interested in the drive, the lack it endlessly encircles. His characters, his stories—always driving, heading nowhere. In the director's own words: "When we tell a story, we tell but one story, and each member of the audience, with a peculiar capacity to imagine things, hears but one story. But when we say nothing, it's as if we said a great number of things . . . It's necessary to envision an unfinished and incomplete cinema so that the spectator can intervene and fill the void, the lacks."[31]

In her analysis of *Taste of Cherry,* Copjec does not fall for Kiarostami's bait; her attunement to desire proscribes her such vanities as filling the void. Instead, she renders it legible, dons it a name: *fatigue.* As such, hers is not yet another interpretation of the film, but its illumination as negative evidence.

Or is it the negativity of evidence tout court that is here being evinced? Per Jean-Luc Nancy, whose meditation on Kiarostami's work aptly carries the title *The Evidence of the Film*, this is precisely evidence's essence: "It is [not] an unveiling, because evidence always keeps a secret or an essential reserve: the reserve of its very light, and where it comes from."[32] To see the image, one must become blind to the light carrying it, the light it carries. Similarly, the emergence of fatigue in

Taste of Cherry becomes for Copjec contingent on the effacement of the subject that vehicles it. As if Badii's suffering can only become legible as fatigue once he's been subjected to one of Kiarostami's signature cosmic long shots. As if his fatigue can only be witnessed once, far from sight and reduced to pixelated size, he's been swallowed whole by the influx of night's negative space within the frame.

But can it be otherwise? Is Copjec's telescoping of fatigue in order to better grasp it not ultimately in faithful deference to the phenomenon she is studying? For it remains one of fatigue's paradoxes that its best witness is an absent one. Far from the unspectacular sight of the weary man, unperturbed by the lack of material traces leftover by fatigue in the empirical field, the absent witness alone becomes capable of truly *seeing* fatigue. Like Saint Louis, whose martyrdom at the hands of fatigue could only be attested to by Joinville, who lay far from the dying king at the moment of his expiry, Badii's fatigue most readily crystallizes once he's removed from sight. As Jean-Louis Chrétien remarks in the case of Saint Louis:

> But what do we see when we see someone die of fatigue? Do we see fatigue in this sight, in the sight of someone who can no longer [*qui n'en peut plus*] tolerate the extenuation of his potential, and disappear? Must we be there where fatigue, at the peak of its presence, makes one cede to it and absent themself—*vita concedere*, as said Tacite—to see, to know fatigue? But what is there to see, and can we be present there?[33]

Whether in *Taste of Cherry* or in the clinic, fatigue is nowhere to be found. Like much affliction, it lies beyond the pale of empirical scrutiny. But this, Chrétien crucially remarks, is not limited to the act of witnessing another's fatigue: it applies to the subject of fatigue themself. "[I]s [fatigue] not in and of itself . . . a presence to that which we are not present yet still or already attest to?"[34] In the interval of fatigue—the lag yawned open between a subject and its being, a subject always already late to itself—the inevitability and futility of witness are borne out. For the weary subject not only struggles to remain alert to the world

that surrounds them; they also struggle to remain present to themself, their fatigue. Fatigue undoes the subjectivity required for its experience. It voids its beholder's testimony, rendering them an impossible witness to their own suffering.

At this stage in Badii's case—and who would dare refuse *Taste of Cherry* the scientifico-legal status of the case study—we find ourselves in a difficult position.[35] With no witness and no body (of evidence), how can we hope to prove Badii's fatigue beyond the processual exclusion rehearsed by critical and clinical diagnoses alike? Indeed, has this not been precisely the purview of this text—to *prove*—to demonstrate that this affliction called *fatigue* has a place in the body of the subject that struggles to entrap and exude it; that it need not be inferred from the extenuation of a man who has everything and suffers from nothing; that it can be allotted the dignity of cause; be reason enough to want to die; be named without first surveying the entire manual of psychiatric and organic diagnoses, one by one ruling each out, sifting through the evidence until all that is left is the lack of evidence itself?

What would it require to discern between the lack of evidence and the evidence of lack? What would be necessary to no longer consider fatigue as the refuse of mind-body dualism, but its generative cut? These are questions that pertain to possibility: the possibility of *naming what kills us*.[36] Their elaboration demands we think fatigue as a form of what Danielle Collobert called "the unrealizable and constant suicide by little pieces, the slow flame of that burn."[37] To wrest fatigue from its bind as "the most modest of misfortunes" and declare its murder,[38] for "one does not die alone," warns Collobert, "one is killed."[39]

Fatigue has and continues to extinguish many lives in the shadow of clinical and forensic diagnoses (as well as psychoanalytic and philosophical ones, as we have seen). If there's been a conscientious effort throughout this discussion not to neatly differentiate between these dual registers—of medicine and law—it is not

for the sake of metaphorical effect, but simply because the clinic is also a legal forum when a patient's affliction is put on trial. Every anamnesis a testimony, every ailing body a body of evidence when the patient's suffering must, a priori, be proved.

What, then, can it possibly entail to prove one's fatigue? The prompt alone inspires an absurd, Kafkaesque scene: that of a weary man being put on trial. In the spirit of *Taste of Cherry,* we end this piece with a coda of its own. A change in the register of the text, the texture of its grain. The (re)appearance of the disappeared. The passing of the cold season. But first, *lights*.

[*Night falls, page goes dark*]

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Having lain down to sleep in a makeshift grave, the man is awoken at the break of dawn by the kiss of a pebble ricocheting off his forehead. The Turkish taxidermist who flung the projectile emits a faint sigh of relief; his duty fulfilled, he collects his bounty from the glove compartment of the lone car parked on the side of the road, and leaves. Meanwhile, an acquaintance of the man—his spouse, daughter or friend—having remarked his absence, the note he did or didn't leave behind on the desk by the window of his apartment, had called the authorities. Sometime between the taxidermist's departure and the man's re-entry into consciousness, the uniforms arrive on site, apprehend the man, and bring him into custody. Cue the inexhaustible cycle of evaluations: mental state, organs, faith, law-abiding capacities—all thoroughly scrutinized, re-scrutinized. Reports loftily drafted, re-drafted. Expert diagnosticians from across the capital summoned to opine on the man's case; some deem him criminal, others claim he is insane. A rare few, who believe in the non-contradictory nature of these two states, pronounce him both. Yet always the question, why*? And always the man's answer,* because I'm tired.

And every time the injunction, prove it. *To which the man, weary, can only ever reply,* I would, were I not too tired. *At which point the cycle begins anew, carving out its missing object through the movement of repetition. Such is the trial of fatigue.*

Notes

1. The effect is akin to the psychological autopsy documented in suicidology literature, whereby the mental state of the subject who has committed suicide is investigated, speculated upon, and retroactively diagnosed. For a critical discussion of this, see China Mills, "'Dead People Don't Claim': A Psychopolitical Autopsy of UK Austerity Suicides," *Critical Social Policy* 38, no. 2 (2018): 302–22. For a discussion of Mills in the context of self-immolation, see Timothy DeMay, "Occupations: A Repertoire of Experimental Political and Artistic Practices" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2022): 102–5. ↩

2. Joan Copjec, "Battle Fatigue: Kiarostami and Capitalism," in *Lacan Contra Foucault*, ed. Nadia Bou Ali and Rohit Goel (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018). ↩

3. Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), 24–25. Cited in Copjec, "Battle Fatigue," 140. ↩

4. Throughout this text, I use the terms *weariness, tiredness* and *fatigue* interchangeably. While historicizations of these concepts differ, along with their contemporary disciplinary affiliations (weariness being an analytic in literary humanities, while fatigue predominates in scientific labor management and the clinic), I equivocate them precisely in the spirit of this essay's argument on the porousness of the critical-clinical divide in fatigue. As historicizations of fatigue methodically repent, fatigue is a protean and ambiguous concept. This essay yields to the slipperiness of its signifier. For a theory of the critical-clinical, see Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical.*, trans. Michael A. Greco and Daniel W. Smith (University Of Minnesota Press, 1997). For recent historizations of fatigue-related concepts, see Anna Katharina Schaffner, *Exhaustion* (Columbia University Press, 2016); Georges Vigarello, *A History of Fatigue: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Nancy Erber (Polity, 2022); Philippe Zawieja, ed., *Dictionnaire de La Fatigue* (Librairie Droz, 2016). ↩

5. Accordingly, Jonathan Sterne adduces Levinas's theory of fatigue as an example of what he deems a "nondepletionist" model of fatigue. In the final chapter of *Diminished Faculties,* Sterne outlines a crip theory of fatigue that departs from depletionist models —of fatigue qua impairment of normative, able-bodied, energetic subjects—towards a political phenomenology of fatigue as presence. While I share Sterne's concerns about the ableist and capitalist underpinnings of depletionist models, our theoretical horizons differ insofar as I seek less to redeem fatigue as presence than to insist on its negativity. Nevertheless, Sterne's contribution remains invaluable within "the world of

disability theory and activism, {where} fatigue is not as well understood as one might expect." I remain grateful for the all too brief yet infinite conversation we shared. See Jonathan Sterne, "There Are Never Enough Spoons," in *Diminished Faculties: A Political Phenomenology of Impairment* (Duke University Press, 2021), 157–91; Rouzbeh Shadpey, "At the Mercy of Limitless Loss: Physiological Aneconomies of Chronic Fatigue," Weird Economies, January 15, 2024, https://weirdeconomies.com/contributions/at-the-mercy-of-limitless-loss. ↩

6. Levinas, *Existence and Existents,* 33. Cited in Copjec, "Battle Fatigue," 144. ↩
7. Copjec, "Battle Fatigue," 148–9. ↩
8. Copjec, "Battle Fatigue," 140. ↩
9. Copjec, "Battle Fatigue," 140. ↩
10. This last point constitutes Copjec's deft critique of Jonathan Crary's conceptualization of sleep in his oft-cited *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. ↩
11. For a recent, beautiful display of funambulism along this tightrope, see Hannah Proctor, *Burnout* (Verso Books, 2024). ↩
12. The most comprehensive account of the scientific emergence of fatigue at the dawn of industrial capitalism remains Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (Basic Books, 1990). ↩
13. This double-sidedness explains how, in the early twentieth century, Josephine Goldmark and other labor advocates were able to mobilize the fatigue research of industrial physiologists against the industrial managers whom it initially benefited in order to secure workers rights in the name of fatigue's negative impact on efficiency. See Josephine Goldmark, *Fatigue and Efficiency: A Study in Industry* (Charities Publication, 1912). ↩
14. I am perhaps a little partial here: the contest for the (metaphoric) illness par excellence of capitalist modernity is far from being a one-man race. Recent compelling cases have been drawn for hypochondria, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and autism—to name but a few. See Ghalya Saadawi, "Critical Incision: Hypochondria, Autotheory, and the Health-Illness Dialectic," *PhiloSOPHIA* 12, no. 1–2 (2022): 57–83,https://doi.org/10.1353/phi.2022.0011 < https://doi.org/10.1353/phi.2022.0011> ; Jennifer L. Fleissner, "Obsessional Modernity: The 'Institutionalization of Doubt,'" *Critical Inquiry* 34, no. 1 (September 2007): 106–34,https://doi.org/10.1086/526089 < https://doi.org/10.1086/526089> ; Franco Bifo Berardi, *The Third Unconscious* (Verso Books, 2021). ↩
15. Most surprising is how even the scientific and biomedical fields responsible for the edification and maintenance of the modern concept of fatigue partake in this view. In her forthcoming manuscript on myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome (ME/CFS), Emily Rogers formulates this under the rubric of "making fatigue normal," whereupon medical and labor sciences, throughout the twentieth century, together cemented the hegemonic assumption of fatigue as a "normal side-effect" of capitalist

conditions of labor. Per Roger, and as I highlight in this text, this sociohistorical normalization of fatigue—rooted in the so-called difficulty of parsing "pathological" fatigue from "everyday tiredness"—is inextricable from, and a necessary condition to ME/CFS's dismissal as a medical condition (or a pathological framework of fatigue tout court). This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the colloquial expression, "Am I sick or just tired?" where illness and fatigue are understood to be mutually exclusive. ↩

16. From its early nineteenth-century conceptualization as neurasthenia—considered to be a nervous maladaptation to the accelerating pace of modernity—the purported social etiology of fatigue syndromes has estranged them from the clinic. In the 1990s, academic and popular theories of fatigue syndromes qua mass hysterical contagion, vehicled most famously by the likes of Elaine Showalter and Edward Shorter, were used to discredit the clinical relevance of intractable forms of fatigue. While these still loom large in the clinical imaginary (especially in its understanding of chronic fatigue as a psychosomatic condition), today it is the ubiquitous and banal discourse of burnout that drives fatigue's generalization. No longer the adverse effects of mass media on unconscious feminine minds, but the internalized norms of performance society, coupled with the "limitless possibilities" of the white bourgeois subject, now condition this "epidemic" of fatigue. See Elaine Showalter, *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media* (Columbia University Press, 1997); Edward Shorter, *From Paralysis to Fatigue* (Free Press, 1993); Alain Ehrenberg, *La Fatigue d'Être Soi : Dépression et Société* (Odile Jacob, 1998); Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society* (Stanford University Press, 2015). ↩

17. "The oblique reference to someone cancels itself out, or better said, it assigns to resemblance a peculiar intransitive sense. For what it says about Akiko is that she resembles no one, no one we can point to… least of all herself. . . . She resembles herself insofar as she is not identical to herself. She holds together as a subject only on the condition that she is irreducible to a set of traits that objectify her." Joan Copjec, "A Cinema of Subtraction," online lecture, posted May 2024, by ZRC SAZU, YouTube, 42:45, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g3i7LHzp_6U&t=3660s < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g3i7LHzp_6U&t=3660s> . ↩

18. This bears an interesting resonance with another conceptual forebear of fatigue, *acedia*. Among the desert ascetics of the third and fourth centuries from which the concept derives, the term *adiaphoria*—literally meaning "not different"—was used to refer to the collapsed distinction between humans, animals, and environment ushered by desert life. This connotation of spatial indifference is further complemented by an affective understanding of indifference as lack of will and motivation. See Rikus Van Eeden, "Fatigue and Exhaustion: A Philosophical Topography" (PhD Diss., KU Leuven, 2024): 89. ↩

19. As exemplified by the following disclaimer in one sociological study of exhaustion: "This approach is strictly sociological. It leaves it up to doctors and psychotherapists to provide answers to the question of what actually ails people and why, and especially to make proposals about how they should be helped." But do these sociological analyses not ultimately bleed into the clinic? Indeed, how must we understand the divide between the critical and clinical portended by such disclaimers, when clinicians

regularly write off patients with debilitating forms of chronic fatigue as being merely burned out? Do historical and contemporary theories of fatigue's social etiology not bleed into and shape the clinic precisely where fatigue is at its severest form? Ulrich Bröckling, "Rechargeable Man in a Hamster Wheel World: Contours of a Trendsetting Illness," in *Burnout, Fatigue, Exhaustion: An Interdisciplinary Perspective on a Modern Affliction*, ed. Sighard Neckel, Anna Katharina Schaffner, and Greta Wagner (Springer International Publishing, 2017), 219. ↩

20. *Symptom* is not employed here in its psychoanalytic sense—as latent-meaning to be hyperbolized, tended to, enjoyed—or in its derivative literary sense, but in its clinical, semiotic sense—as a sign of an underlying disorder. ↩

21. Copjec, "Battle Fatigue," 140. ↩

22. Zupančič was led to make the connection between the Freudian death drive and fatigue upon being invited to speak at the Pembroke Research Seminar in 2015–2016. Led by Copjec herself, fatigue was the seminar's theme. ↩

23. Zupančič, *What Is Sex?*, 97. ↩

24. Eyal Weizman, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability* (Zone Books, 2017), 18. ↩

25. Oxford Criteria for Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. See Joseph R. Yancey and Sarah M. Thomas, "Chronic Fatigue Syndrome: Diagnosis and Treatment," *American Family Physician* 86, no. 8 (October 15, 2012): 741–46,https://www.aafp.org/pubs/afp/issues/2012/1015/p741.html < https://www.aafp.org/pubs/afp/issues/2012/1015/p741.html> . ↩

26. I reiterate that *symptom* here is to be understood clinically, not psychoanalytically. For if chronic fatigue is the clinical symptom par excellence, its symptomatic nature within psychoanalysis remains contested on the basis of the early Freudian theory of the actual neuroses (to which neurasthenia belonged), which postulated the somatic symptom as excess drive jettisoned through the body without symbolic mediation. See Rouzbeh Shadpey, "In Defense of Indefensible Expressions: On the Pure Complaint of Chronic Fatigue," *Parapraxis*, July 7, 2025,https://www.parapraxismagazine.com/articles/in-defense-of-indefensible-expressions < https://www.parapraxismagazine.com/articles/in-defense-of-indefensible-expressions> . ↩

27. Frantz Fanon, "The 'North African Syndrome,'" in *Toward the African Revolution* (Grove Press, 1969), 8 (emphasis mine). ↩

28. Fanon, "The 'North African Syndrome,'" 8. ↩

29. While the Levinasian concept of fatigue theoretically reverses this logic by positing fatigue as the cause, not the consequence, of action, it is interesting to note how this logic nevertheless clinically and critically plays out in reverse. ↩

30. Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977–1978)* (Columbia University Press, 2005), 17. ↩

31. As cited in Hamish Ford, "Driving into the Void: Kiarostami's Taste of Cherry," *Journal of Humanistics and Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–27. ↩

32. "*Ce {l'évidence} n'est pas non plus un dévoilement, car l'évidence garde toujours un secret ou une réserve essentielle: la réserve de sa lumière même, et d'où elle provient.*" Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'évidence Du Film: Abbas Kiarostami* (Yves Gevaert Éditeur, 2007), 43 (translation my own). ↩

33. "*Mais que voit-on en voyant quelqu'un mourir de fatigue? Est-ce qu'on voit la fatigue en voyant cela, en voyant celui qui n'en peut plus n'en pouvoir plus même de cette exténuation de son pouvoir, et disparaître? Faudrait-il y être, pour voir, pour savoir la fatigue là où, au comble de sa présence, elle fait qu'on lui cède et qu'on s'absente,* vita concedere, *comme dit Tacite? Mais y a t-il à voir, et peut-on y être?*" Jean-Louis Chrétien, *De La Fatigue* (Les Éditions de Minuit, 1996), 22 (translation my own). ↩

34. "*Et surtout, n'est-elle {la fatigue} pas elle-même cela . . . une présence à ce à quoi l'on n'est pas présent de façon que pourtant l'on en témoigne encore ou déjà?*" Chrétien, *De La Fatigue,* 23. ↩

35. As Lauren Berlant remarks, "The case represents a problem-event that has animated some kind of judgment. Any enigma could do—a symptom, a crime, a causal variable, a situation, a stranger, or any irritating obstacle to clarity." Fittingly, *Taste of Cherry*'s enigma is at once all of these. See Lauren Berlant, "On the Case," *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (June 2007): 663, https://doi.org/10.1086/521564 < https://doi.org/10.1086/521564> . ↩

36. My gratitude extends to Mayra A. Rodríguez Castro for providing this prompt and introducing me to Collobert's work. ↩

37. Danielle Collobert, *Murder*, trans. Nathanaël (Litmus Press, 2013), 9. ↩

38. Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation,* trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xx. ↩

39. Collobert, *Murder,* 96. ↩

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